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ABSTRACT

It is a commonly held assumption that Harvard-trained rhetoricians during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were concerned mainly with superficial mechanical correction, and, further, that they dissociated student writing from any meaningful context and contributed to the division between composition and literature. Howard James Savage was one such Harvard-trained rhetorician brought into Bryn Mawr College to replace the well-respected head of the essay department, Dr. Regina Crandall. Some investigative work shows that one of the main reasons M. Carey Thomas made the personnel change was that she was convinced the essay department could be run in a more cost efficient manner. What Savage established at Bryn Mawr was a new set of requirements for writing instructors: they had to work harder than other teachers, make less money, and consider themselves separate and, therefore, subordinate to the literature faculty and have no hope of advancement beyond the rank of Essay Reader. He also narrowed the writing teacher's range of concerns by institutionalizing a set of symbols to be used when grading and by discouraging extensive comments on papers as "uneconomical." He believed that the most desirable qualities in a composition instructor were physical strength and endurance, "horse sense," patience and tolerance. Such unflattering attributes justified keeping salaries low and the potential for advancement non-existent. (TB)

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"Replacing nice thin, Bryn Mawr Miss Crandall with Fat, Harvard Dr. Savage": M. Carey Thomas and the "Essay work" at Bryn Mawr College, 1902-1917

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Donald Stewart, in a 1992 article in 4 CCCs, lists four pedagogical "offenses" that rhetoricians trained at Harvard during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century are often accused of: (1) reducing writing instruction to a concern for superficial mechanical correctness (2) greatly increasing an unproductive and debilitating fixation on grammar instruction (3) dissociating student writing from any meaningful context (4) and contributing to the division between composition and literature. He then challenges someone (preferably someone with lots of time on her hands) to try to find out whether Harvard men actively spread these impoverished ideas to the Universities where they went to teach and direct departments.

Having a lot of time on my hands and a financially and morally supportive husband, I took up Mr. Stewart's challenge and drove up the road from Baltimore to Bryn Mawr College, where I knew that M. Carey Thomas in 1915 had hired Howard James Savage, a new Harvard PhD., to head the Essay department as Associate Professor of Rhetoric. To give Savage this position, Thomas had to demote a popular and well-respected faculty member, Dr. Regina Crandall, who had been with the college since 1902 and had directed the Essay department since 1908. That Thomas could do this to a veteran teacher and department Head outraged many faculty, who then used the incident to convince the Board of Directors that Thomas had too

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much control over appointments and curriculum. Thomas also spent 1916 responding to letters of protest from students and alumni, one of whom complained that Thomas had replaced nice, thin Bryn Mawr Miss Crandall with fat, Harvard Savage.

Aside from wanting to explore the scandal, I wondered if Savage committed any of the offenses supposedly typical of Harvard-trained rhetoricians when he reorganized the department. Did he take a perfectly good program and ruin it with an over-emphasis on grammatical correctness? I also wondered why Thomas was so unhappy with Crandall's program. What did Thomas want out of the Essay Department? How did composition fit in with her educational goals for Bryn Mawr Women? Did Harvard-trained Savage seem to deliver what she wanted better than Crandall, who had a PhD in history and was self-trained in rhetoric?

I'll begin with Thomas's educational goals and philosophy, paying particular attention to what she said about language and about the Essay work at Bryn Mawr. Thomas wanted her graduates to attain standards of scholarship equal to leading men's private colleges in the East and, if they didn't already have it, the manners and speech of the elite social class. Though Thomas herself was born in a middle-class Quaker home, she believed that close friendships with wealthy friends, travel abroad and literary study had refined her. Likewise, she saw the college community as a great opportunity for those who were not born into the elite classes "to correct provincialisms, uncouth pronunciations" and "to get rid of expressions that no person of culture could possibly use." Bryn Mawr students came from both lower and upper social classes, but it

was her design that the higher should establish linguistic practice for all. She hoped that Bryn Mawr students would become part of that elite group who spoke and wrote only the most refined English, who appreciated art and literature, and who used leisure hours for "voracious and limitless reading of poetry and unending discussions of abstract questions among themselves," as she had done during her years as a student in Europe and as she longed to do even during her years as President. Thomas made good manners, good English and literary culture the subjects of many of her daily chapel talks to students.

Thomas intended the required two-year course in English, which combined study of literary history, rhetoric and composition, and elocution, to be the vehicle of her educational goals for students. She taught literature courses in the mid-1890s, and after this continued to consider herself Head of the English department and to concern herself in every detail of the English course work. When Crandall asked to represent the Essay department as a member of the faculty, Thomas told her that she herself performed that role. Crandall also complained that Thomas made departmental decisions and informed her only after the fact. I believe Crandall when she writes that if the essay work was unsatisfactory, Thomas was as much to blame as anyone.

But was the English work unsatisfactory, given Thomas's educational goals? Much of it was certainly designed to emphasize correctness in speech, grammar, and spelling long before Mr. Savage set foot on campus. An entrance exam made sure students could correct sentences with bad grammar, and those who couldn't were

not accepted. Mr. King was there year in and year out with his elocution class designed to "cure nasality and other vicious habits of speaking" and to point out the "means of instruction for improving the quality of the speaking voice and for acquiring a correct production." Students were required to read aloud "in order that individual faults may be corrected." A special class was provided for those "whose defects of articulation are so marked as to make it difficult for them to work with the other members of the class."

In addition to remediating students with nasality, students who misspelt too many words on their matriculation exam were admitted but took a special course, and took it over and over until they passed. Mary Robertson, whose grade-point average ranked among the top ten women in 1915, repeated the spelling class three times. The course was clearly the mandate of M. Carey Thomas, who insisted it remain in the curriculum even though students and faculty detested it.

Students coudn't elect the course in literature without an accompanying course in composition because they analyzed literature almost entirely in terms of the rhetorical principles they studied in books like A. S. Hill's The Foundations of Rhetoric, which the Bryn Mawr course catalogue listed as good preparation for the required English from its publication date in 1896 until Savage arrived. For an example of this kind of criticism, listen to Mary Scattergood, a student in both Beatrice Daw's composition class and Lucy Donnelly's literary history class, as she critiques Ecclesiastes 11, verses 7-12:

> The very simplicity of the construction, the absence of descriptive adjectives and unnecessary words and the ordinary words which he uses bring out the meaning with unusual force.

Of Psalms 127, however, she is more critical:

> The style is not particularly clear because of the hidden meaning and illogical transition.

Clarity, force, the use of ordinary words and the minimization of unnecessary words are all points taken up by Hill in Foundations of Rhetoric and in many rhetorics of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.

Scattergood's teacher Beatrice Daw also looked for force and clarity in her student's writing. The place I see her following Hill most closely is in her comments about the style of Scattergood's prose. Daw notes:

> good phrasing--simple and forcible;
> paper has a good substantial quality, phrased often forcefully though awkwardly;
> you have written clearly with good structure, but haven't observed keenly

On the other hand, Daw ignores Hill's concentration on grammar and usage, making her most extensive comments on outlines for papers. For example, on an outline for a paper on the Anglo-Saxon narrative

poem "Judith." Scattergood writes that "Judith is so really drawn that she seems to live outside of the poem." In response, Daw underlines the word "really," and writes in the margin:

> How far does this deliniation of character really go? Is there any of the modern subtle psychological analysis? A search for motive? etc. Be careful of a hasty statement here.

At the end of the outline, Daw further advises Scattergood:

> . . . your tendency is, I think, to generalize at the expense of more searching effort; it would therefore profit you much more to limit your subject and see how far an intensive study would bring you. Make it 'deep, rather than broad.

In general, Daw doesn't seem overly concerned with grammar. At the word level, her major concerns are repetitive words and phrases, imprecise words, and misused words, her usual method simply to underline these. The comments of Ida Langdon, who taught Scattergood during the second semester of required composition, are similar to Daw's in their emphasis.

The evidence I examined leads me to conclude that teachers before Savage's arrival were influenced by Hill's rhetoric, but did not share his emphasis on mechanical correctness or grammar instruction. Perhaps they believed that the matriculation exam and

spelling class took care of these concerns. If Thomas's goal was to refine Scattergood's language and literary taste so that it matched the standards of the elite class, I'd still say her English department was doing a pretty good job. The marks on their papers and outlines show a fair balance between stylistic, grammatical, and critical concerns. Thomas's chief complaint about the Essay department and her reason for bringing in Savage had nothing to do with the quality of teaching, however; it had rather to do with the expense of the department. Thomas wrote in 1907 to Katherine Fullerton, who was director that year: "I have just returned from seeing a number of instructors and assistant professors in men's colleges and universities, who are doing essay work and giving advanced composition courses, and I find that our department at Bryn Mawr is run in a more expensive way than any other essay department that I know of, and that the work assigned to our individual readers is far less." In 1909 Thomas gave the reigns of the department to Crandall, telling Fullerton that the "results [of her way of arranging the essay work] financially are very disappointing." As director, Crandall made $2000; Beatrice Daw made $1000. Both Crandall and Daw taught about 50 students in the required English and had other duties; Crandall taught narrative writing and Daw, spelling. The 1912 Hopkins Report on the labor and cost of composition found that the average composition teacher made $1,000 a year and taught 105 students. In comparison to the average teacher, then, Bryn Mawr teachers made more or the same pay and taught fewer students. Still, since the 1890s, when Thomas's little sister Helen worked as an instructor, teachers complained of overwork, underpay and little

departmental recognition; when Helen and Lucy Donnelly confronted Carey Thomas with the overwork of writing teachers, Lucy cried.

But Lucy Donnelly didn't cry for long; instead she used composition as a stepping-stone to teaching literature, which is what Thomas had wanted her to do. And while Crandall made 2,000 directing and teaching the Essay work, Donnelly made $3,000 teaching literature. Thomas was aggravated by teachers like Crandall who didn't want to teach literature, though she found it difficult to get rid of them when they were popular with students and alumni, as Crandall was. In a 1913 letter to Crandall, Thomas summarizes her dissatisfaction with her:

> I think, however, that I ought to state frankly that if at any future time we should succeed in calling a Reader here or if we should succeed in developing among the Readers who are here anyone with a strong literary interest such as was exercised by Miss Donnelly, Miss King and Mrs. Gerould when they were in the [Essay] department and if it should seem best for the good of the Department to place the direction of the second year work in her hands the College is entirely free to do so."

The problem with Crandall was that though her students thought her an outstanding teacher, she refused either to display any "literary quality" and move on to the literature side of the English department or to resign her low-paying, subordinate status. Instead, she fought on year after year, teaching her courses, managing the

other Readers, and arguing for increases in their salaries and in their status as teachers of writing. This is the crisis that Thomas hoped Howard Savage would solve.

After studying the department for a year in 1915, the following was the substance of Savage's report to Thomas:

> The chief crux has come in the correction of papers and the use made of these corrections. In the past I am convinced that readers have spent an inordinate amount of time in writing out corrections which might far better have been made by symbols.
>
> In short, previously readers have lacked the perspective which should enable them to judge which were matters worthy of detailed comment and which were not.
> In no elementary course is it profitable to attempt to turn out finished writers, because there is not the remotest possibility of teaching more than the 'respectabilities,' as they should be taught. I thoroughly believe that the new method will not require an excessive amount of time, provided the readers learn to read themes economically and to spend their time to the best advantage. . . . I do not believe that the system as practiced at present is so economically operated as it was some time ago. At present I am convinced that most of the readers allow students to shift upon their shoulders a weight of preparation and planning of papers which not

only burdens the readers, but actually militates against students' getting the most from the course.

Savage's solution to the problem involved a set of symbols teachers could use in correcting student papers, which the college printed in a manual students bought for 25 cents. This new Method, Savage appears to have thought, justified increasing the number of students per class to 80, reducing the number of semesters in which composition was taught from four to two, separating the composition course from the literature course, and reducing the teaching staff from seven teachers to four teachers and one half-time teacher. Savage chose to retain the least experienced teachers and therefore cheapest teachers. He recommends Miss Hill who "modestly considers other readers from their experience to have a stronger claim to re-appointment than she; but says that she should enjoy the work as presented to her and that she would heartily co-operate;" Needless to say, more experienced teachers refused to co-operate. Thomas, however, objected to making Hill a full-time teacher as she was then spending half of her time as the President's personal secretary; records show that Thomas often found it very difficult to fill that slot. Instead, Hill was made a part-time Reader making $450 a year. Craven and Dunn continued to receive their salaries of $900 and $1000. Shearer, Langdon and Crane, the three teachers fired, each had made $1500, the maximum amount paid to composition teachers.

Both Thomas and Savage had similar views as to the qualifications of composition teachers, one of the chief qualities being physical strength and the willingness to exert themselves. Thomas in 1906 had refused to renew the contract of Miss Marsh when she heard that the woman was in a "broken down and overworked condition" and had complained that she was "very much overworked in the Essay department." Furthermore, explained Thomas, Marsh was "unable to manage large classes" and the department needs "readers on whom we can call in an emergency to do extra work without fear of breaking them down." Savage also shared Thomas's belief that "the successful teacher of composition" must have "physical strength," as he wrote in a 1921 article for The English Journal:

> "The teacher of composition . . . must exercise for long hours at a stretch a constant vigilance against errors of detail, even the most minute, and at the same time 'hold his standard, take an occasional glance at those eternal values which he must apply and correlate to the case of his individual student. For such constant application he must have a strong body, which from time to time he must refresh by exercise and physical relaxation."

Howard Savage's biggest contribution to the Bryn Mawr Essay department was to strengthen Thomas's long-held conviction that writing teachers should worker harder than other faculty and make less, a belief that until his entry into the department, she had found

it difficult to support, largely due to Crandall's efforts and to a tight group of teachers who stuck together on important issues such as work-loads.

Technically, Savage was responsible for separating the required courses in composition from those in literature. However, Crandall had argued for this separation as early as 1908 but had been refused by Thomas, who saw the composition courses as important stepping-stones for teachers who showed literary ability. Crandall wanted the courses separated because she felt "students who are learning to write English will profit more by parallel reading of modern English than by study of early English masterpieces from Beowulf to Marlowe. (Anglo-Saxon and early masterpieces were almost exclusively the subject of the literature portion of the required English courses, with two-thirds of the required composition papers written about topics covered in the literature classes). Crandall also resented the subordinate status of the writing class and wanted to assign her own topics and quizzes, instead of preparing students for the papers and quizzes of literature teachers.

Savage separated literature and composition with difficult goals and priorities in mind. Imitating the course plan at Harvard under LeBaron Briggs, Savage planned instruction in exposition and argument for the first semester of the freshman year, and description and narration for the second. The courses still relied heavily on illustrative reading, but the separation of the composition from the literature course made it clearer that composition faculty were separate from literature faculty. In his English Journal article that listed the qualities of the good composition instructor, Savage

made it clear that "an interest in things literary is [not] a sure qualification for the teacher of composition." Instead, Savage advocated "plain, horse sense," patience, tolerance, sympathy, physical strength and endurance.

What Savage established at Bryn Mawr was a new set of requirements for writing instructors: they had to work harder than other teachers, make less money, and consider themselves separate and therefore subordinate to the literature faculty and without hope of advancement beyond the rank of Essay Reader. (Savage himself, on the other hand, taught advanced courses in literature). He also narrowed the writing teacher's range of concerns when commenting on student papers by giving her too many students and by calling extensive comments made during the planning stages uneconomical. The motivation for these changes, I believe, was not to follow Hill or any other rhetorician, but rather to subordinate writing teachers by limiting them to the kind of criticism that could be done with a list of symbols. To make their work the product of "horse sense," patience and tolerance justified keeping their salaries low and their potential for advancement non-existent.